



Reducing student 'suspension rates' and engaging students in learning: principal and teacher approaches that work

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Abstract

The negative effects of student suspension from school on both the individual and the community are well documented and relate to a wide range of matters, including school completion rates, homelessness and crime. Two recent, extensive reviews of student suspensions in government and non-government schools in N.S.W. (Gonczi and Riordan, 2002; Riordan and Gonczi, 2003) suggest that variations among schools in rates of student suspension may be best explained by 'school effects' and not characteristics of students. This article explores the key issues of principal and teacher attitudes and actions in relation to student suspensions with reference to three case studies. The discussion of these cases raises some key considerations for principals and teachers in difficult schools who wish to re-engage students in learning. Key themes discussed in this article include: the importance of a pedagogical as opposed to a punitive response to student misbehaviour; working in partnership with parents and the broader community to address behaviour and learning problems; and interpreting 'state' and 'school system' policies on student welfare and discipline through the lens of the school's local context.

Keywords community engagement, leadership, student suspension

Introduction

In March 2002, approximately 30 boys from two different Sydney high schools engaged in a violent fight in a shopping centre near one of the high schools. Some of the boys were armed with machetes. There was a public outcry. The N.S.W. government asserted that the schools in its jurisdiction took a tough stance in relation to violence and misbehaviour. Furthermore, they stated that these schools were safe, and referred to the policy (N.S.W. Department of Education and Training, 1999) that principals had the authority and support of the government to suspend and expel troublesome students.

It was in this context that the NSW government commissioned several research studies to examine matters related to student welfare and discipline. Two of these studies were designed with a particular focus on evaluating current practices in relation to the suspension and expulsion of students.

There are approximately 3200 schools in N.S.W., with approximately 2300 being government schools and 900 being non-government schools (N.S.W. Department of Education and Training, 2004). Two of the studies (Gonczi and Riordan, 2002; Riordan and Gonczi, 2003) described the exclusion policies and practices in government and non-government schools and made recommendations for changes to policy and practice. These were: an attempt to ensure more effective responses to student misbehaviour; safeguard students' rights to natural justice; provide a safe environment for students and teachers; and to ensure that schools and school systems were appropriately accountable to the community in these areas.

Both studies comprised the gathering and detailed statistical analysis of exclusion rates in N.S.W. government and non-government schools. They also included approximately 50 school visits and interviews with principals and senior staff, focus groups with school, community, parent and student representatives and analysis of relevant policy documents. It was during the quantitative and qualitative analyses, and particularly the analysis of suspension rates for specific schools, that it became clear that suspension rates appeared to be subject to individual 'school effects'.

This is an important observation because it challenges the deficit theories of many teachers and principals in the two studies. These deficit theories are also prevalent in the media and the community. Deficit explanations of student misbehaviour and exclusion from school take the form of the students and their background being the main cause of student exclusion. The alternative view understands student misbehaviour as a product of characteristics of students in combination with school factors such as rules, policies, curriculum offerings, attitudes of teachers and principals, the provision or lack thereof of counselling, and other student-support services.

Under the deficit view, a school with high rates of suspension has the challenge of dealing with a difficult group of students or with a difficult community. This latter aspect is often expressed by principals and teachers when they attribute behaviour and learning problems to community characteristics such as high unemployment, low aspirations, large numbers of people from non-English-speaking backgrounds, and so forth. The data that were examined in the two studies showed that schools serving the same communities, in some cases located within a few kilometres of each other, had noticeably different suspension rates. Furthermore, within a period of one year, a school's suspension rate could change dramatically. Both these suggest that 'school effects' were a critical factor in suspension rates.

This article presents three case studies from which many aspects of good practice in relation to managing student behaviour can be identified. These are case studies that focus on actions that appeared to be related to lower suspension rates and equally importantly, to interventions, including student exclusions, which seemed to be effective in modifying student behaviour and re-engaging students in the teaching and learning programme of the school.

The case studies

Rocky Plain Central School

Rocky Plain Central School is a K-12 school located in a remote region of N.S.W. The majority of people in the small community in which the school is situated is Aboriginal.

There are 100 students in the school but only three in Year 11. Uniquely there were some 27 adult students who had returned to school to complete their studies, having left school at an early age.

When the current principal came to the school it had one of the highest suspensions rates in N.S.W. The school was characterized by high levels of physical and verbal abuse by students against other students and teachers.

The first task the principal, who was a non-Aboriginal, undertook was a series of community consultations. What he discovered was that the community was opposed to suspensions as these were viewed as 'a holiday' for children rather than as a way of getting children to reflect on their misbehaviour. He also discovered that in the town swearing was accepted as part of normal day-to-day communication.

Given the community views, the principal decided to adopt a number of alternatives to suspension. He made the point to the researchers that, while he had no doubt that suspension was an important tool for behaviour management across N.S.W., it was imperative to find local solutions to local problems.

He adopted a combination of both proactive and reactive strategies to address the problems in school. The strategies included:

- designing a set of standards for acceptable behaviour based on a Glasser-type levels system;
- a substantial professional development programme for teachers, most of whom were in their first year of teaching;
- the development of appropriately phased curriculum materials for students; and
- a system of rewards, where students were rewarded in notional dollars for good behaviour and were able to use these dollars for a weekly auction of donated gifts. These auctions were attended by students, staff and members of the community.

The importance of the professional development of the teaching staff can not be overstated as most of them were inclined, at first, to punish off-task behaviour rather than seek to understand and address it or even to recognize and reward good behaviour. It was also significant that this new policy addressed one of the main problems found in the study in relation to Glasser-type, level-based, discipline policies. This is the tendency of teachers to reactively and rapidly escalate the child through the various stages until exclusion is the sole remaining option.

A major strategy was to tackle the problem of abusive language. He organized a series of community meetings, along with the Aboriginal education officer attached to the school, where he explained the links between violence and abusive language. In addition, in the school as well as in the community, and eventually, in the formal policy of the school, he made a clear distinction between language which had the intention of hurting another student that was not acceptable and swearing as a normal part of communication, which would not result in a punishment but rather in advice and education about the appropriateness of certain words in certain contexts.

In addition to these strategies, the principal worked hard to get the local community involved in the school. There were always at least a dozen local people doing various things in the school, such as teaching local crafts, supervising swimming and so on.

There were also local adults who were undertaking courses known in N.S.W. as School/TAFE courses. These courses were developed by the Technical and Further Education Colleges (TAFE) and offered in schools. Members of the community were undertaking these vocationally oriented TAFE courses alongside the older children in the school. This added to the adult atmosphere of the school and undoubtedly had a positive impact on the students' behaviour. The principal also retitled the computer room 'the Internet Café' and invited the community to use the computers and access the internet.

The introduction of an alternative vocational curriculum in years 7–11 also had a positive impact on school climate and culture. Part of this programme included a peer-tutoring course, where individuals were trained to work with others and were rewarded with a certificate, which would be included in their CVs.

In conclusion, the combination of high expectations of student behaviour and achievement, along with a commitment to understanding and respecting local culture, were major ingredients in the success of this school. The acceptance of difference and a means of devising ways of dealing with this through community support, professional development, curriculum change and the development of rules and rewards, were the keys to success for this school and the principal.

Gold Valley School

Gold Valley is a small mining community in a remote region of the N.S.W. The unique landscape had attracted a range of alternate-community inhabitants in addition to those hoping to 'strike it rich' through mining activities. The community is highly multicultural with children from 24 different national backgrounds represented in the school population. There are some Aboriginal students in the school but the majority are from other backgrounds. The community is predominantly poor. Some of the parents of the students live in camps on the edge of town and violence is common. Many students live in outlying communities and travel substantial distances to get to the town.

The school is a K-12 school, housed in a number of modern buildings in a pleasant physical environment, near the town centre. The attractive appearance of the school contributed to the aspirations of the community regarding the school. 'Some parents want the school to be like Fort Street' (a leading selective school in inner city Sydney), said the principal on commencing his interview with the researchers.

The history of the school had been one of violence and substantial numbers of suspensions. Since coming to the school quite recently, the principal had 'tried to create a good, friendly learning community'. In this the staff had largely succeeded. The school had instituted a system of tracking and recording individual students' behaviour and used this as a way of helping students and parents to understand and modify their behaviours. A great deal of attention had been paid to involving parents and getting them to understand school standards and expectations.

The major changes in recent times had been in the attempts to modify the curriculum. The principal and many of the teachers agreed that the normal academic curriculum was not appropriate for many of the students and there was a need to introduce a more vocationally based, 'hands-on' curriculum. TAFE/schools courses were being gradually introduced and an emphasis on technology and applied studies was being institutionalized through the creation of a 'state of the art' building and facilities.

Some students, who had presented problems to the school in the past and had spent a lot of time on suspension, had been given work experience on a farm, for example, undertaking shearing and fencing. Such experiences needed to be supported by permission from the N.S.W. Board of Studies (BOS) and this had created difficulties because they did not fall within the BOS guidelines. The principal had tried to create other community-based, out-of-school experiences but also faced problems with the teachers, who could not see the value of a non-traditional curriculum. Local police were also suspicious of students being outside the school perimeters. Nevertheless, the principal persisted with the flexible learning reforms and allowed non-attendance for some students. He felt that this was creating a better atmosphere in the school, along with greater levels of skill development.

At the time of undertaking the research, the principal did not think that he had been entirely successful in this attempt to introduce an alternate curriculum but the number of students undertaking such studies was increasing and suspension levels had been coming down slowly.

This case study demonstrated something that was evident in a number of the schools that were studied as part of the two projects. It was that even when there was a recognition of the need for different and alternate learning experiences by a school principal and some teachers, the difficulties of convincing the people within the school and the wider community of parents and local support agencies were often substantial. These need to be addressed if the reforms are to be successful.

Morrison High School

Morrison High School is located in one of the poorer suburbs of Sydney. The suburb has a large multicultural population and this is reflected in the 1100 students in the school. Close to 90 per cent of the students come from a non-English speaking background (NESB). Over recent years there has been a high incidence of violence in the area and this trend was mirrored to some extent at the school. In fact, in the view of the principal, it was the influence of factors outside the school, rather than curriculum or other internal issues, which was the cause of many of the problems in the school. The principal, who had been in the role for five years, was actively working with teachers, students and parents to reduce violence, bullying and general misbehaviour. A strong motivating force for the principal was the need to build students' self esteem. He believed that this could only be done with a combination of teacher, student and parental actions.

He was a strong advocate of developing an overt set of values which were known to all. He also worked in a number of ways to try to ensure that these values were shared. While he supported the state-wide policies on suspensions, his strongly held view, which he translated into actions, was that the general rules needed to be interpreted in creative ways and translated into strategies which were meaningful and helpful, rather than merely compliant.

The strategies he employed with students included the setting up of an active Student Representative Council and the organization of anti-racism and anti-bullying workshops. He constantly sent letters to parents, both to explain policies and to praise students for good work. He also instituted a number of strategies to engage teachers in

what was, in effect, a creative modification of the state-wide policy where all suspended students received work which they needed to undertake during suspension. They also had to engage in some self-reflective exercises and they had to set up appointments with the school counsellor during suspension. A mentoring programme was developed to help the students reintegrate into the school. These mentors continued to meet with the suspended pupil for four weeks after returning from suspension.

A consequence of engaging support plans for the students during their suspension and then later, during their reintegration into the school, was that students gained support for their learning, not just their 'problem' behaviour. In other words, to the extent that the misbehaviour is a product of the student's engagement with learning and the curriculum, these programmes addressed the causes rather than the symptoms of the problem. These were among the most effective interventions seen in the study.

What this case showed was that the principal's leadership in the school and community could reduce the impact on the school of problems that were prevalent in the broader community. The leadership strategies described here do not reject 'deficit' explanations of student misbehaviour but rather place them in the context of the school and its practices. This hopefully leads to a comprehensive range of responses to student misbehaviour that focuses on student learning and ways in which this can be supported.

Discussion

The three cases illuminate some of the ways in which some principals and teachers have responded effectively to serious student misbehaviour. Their leadership behaviour reduced suspension rates in their schools and had a positive impact on student learning and engagement in school life.

The discussion is organized around a number of themes that were evident in the cases and which emerged initially from the two large research projects. The attitudes, philosophies and actions of principals and teachers, captured by these themes, neither work in isolation from each other, nor do they work in each case for each child. It is in various combinations and contexts that they appear to be effective.

Work with parents and the community as partners as opposed to assuming that parents and the community are the problem

One dimension that tended to distinguish between principals and teachers in the schools studied in the two projects was their attitude toward parents. In the cases above, parents were seen as partners in the education of children. What this article has not shown, but what was clear in the two studies, was that principals could arrive at the view that parents are partners from two different though not mutually exclusive positions. The first position, and one evident in the interview with the principal from Rocky Plain Central School, was the belief that parents were the primary educators of children. In his case, working in an Aboriginal community, the parents and the community were the 'primary educators' and he was providing a specialized service to them in the education of their children. The second position for treating parents as partners was more pragmatic. Namely, that if parents and the community are not included, then the school is likely to be less effective in bringing about behavioural change and improved learning outcomes for students.

In each of the above cases it is clear that the approaches would not have been effective had they not involved partnerships with parents and with their local communities. The principal at Rocky Plain Central School had to work with the community, first, to understand community standards of behaviour, and second, to ensure greater consistency between what was being required at home and at school. This is not to say that a school should simply mirror the attitudes and behaviours of the local community but rather, that the school's standards and expectations should be informed by those of the community. Determining standards of acceptable behaviour is a fluid, interactive process – a discourse among the community, home and school.

At Gold Valley School, the principal was working with the community to 'educate' people about the value of alternate curriculum and particularly, about the worth of Vocational Education and Training (VET). In his view, the parents had an unrealistic expectation of the school and this was part of the problem. Students who could not see themselves as part of an academic school were engaging in inappropriate behaviour. The curriculum offerings did not suit their learning needs or their career aspirations. It was not enough just to broaden the curriculum, he had to work in the community to gain acceptance for this initiative so that the students would value the new opportunities.

At Morrison High School, which was a case where the principal viewed the major source of student misbehaviour to lie in the community, the principal actively engaged the community and the teachers in activities to build mutual understanding and to educate the community about anti-racism and alternatives to violence. This principal supported suspended students and their families during suspensions and worked in partnership with parents and outside agencies to improve student behaviour.

Several examples from other schools show how the principals in these cases differed from other principals in their attitudes and approach to parents and the community. First, one principal of a high school with a high suspension rate said that he did not worry too much if he could not meet with or talk to parents before suspending a student. He explained that he was not prepared to wait after school until 7pm to meet parents if they could not come during working hours. He would send the students home with a suspension letter. This was in marked contrast to a principal in a school that had reduced its suspension rates dramatically. The principal of this school had a policy that he would never suspend a child until he could meet with the parents and gain their understanding and support for the suspension. His philosophy was that the suspension would be ineffective without parental support. The third instance was of a principal who complained that he had suspended a young boy and had communicated this decision by means of a letter sent home addressed to his parents. The next morning the mother arrived at the school with the boy and said that as she and her husband worked, and the boy was eight years of age, she was not prepared to leave him at home by himself. She left the boy at the office and went off to work. The principal, who at this stage had still not spoken to the parent, phoned his district superintendent and implored him to support the suspension decision by contacting the mother and forcing her to come and take the child!

The three cases presented earlier in this article show the range of ways in which a principal can work effectively with parents and communities to realize positive outcomes for students. These principals' attitudes and behaviours provided a clear contrast to other principals interviewed. As the literature has also shown, parents and the community need to be involved if suspensions and other interventions are to going to be successful.

Parents are often not aware of the student's behaviour at school and therefore can not act to address this in the home (Banks, 1997). Furthermore, parents often do not support suspensions from school or even within-school suspensions (Chung and Paul, 1996) and so need to be consulted. The rationale for the suspension needs to be explained and understood as well as being seen to be fair (Schetzer, 2000). Community involvement is clearly an important ingredient in effective behaviour interventions (Downing and Keaster, 1998; Farner, 1996; Howard and Johnson, 2000).

Reintegration to the school after a period of suspension

In both government and non-government schools there was considerable variation in the importance principals attached to providing school work for students on suspension. There was also wide variation in terms of the procedures and support for students returning to school after suspensions and the reintegration of suspended students to the school. While the N.S.W. government school policies require that work be set for students and re-integration plans be considered (N.S.W. Department of Education and Training, 1996, 1999), these were not always evident. The study of non-government school student exclusions (Riordan and Gonczi, 2003) clearly showed that reintegration plans in particular were considered to be very important in ensuring that students re-engaged with their school work and did not re-offend.

In the cases above, the principal at Morrison High School, and to a lesser extent at Gold Valley School, placed particular emphasis on this aspect of student suspensions. By focusing the student on school work while on suspension, arguably, school work and not negative behaviour was emphasized. Equally, by planning carefully for the reintroduction of students to classrooms and class work, the focus again was on learning and not on the previous misbehaviour.

Successful reintegration plans though are not just about academic work (Gladden, 2002). They also address behaviour and the factors that contribute to the misbehaviour. This was achieved at Morrison High School through student counselling and the mentor programme. In this way, support was provided for the student to change his or her behaviour. The contrast to this can be seen in schools where there were quite explicit plans and even behaviour contracts developed but there was little support for the student to first understand and then modify his or her behaviour.

Pedagogy not punishment

Referencing five major studies published in 2000, Gladden concluded that 'the widespread use of suspensions is deeply troubling because suspensions have not been shown to modify behaviour, can undermine students' academic achievement, and are disproportionately applied to minority students' (2002: 263–4). In Australia, a study of truancy and criminal activity found that 'excluding a student was 4.5 times more likely to result in criminal behaviour than if a student truanted for the same period of time' (Stranger, 2002: 117). The report recommended that exclusion and expulsion from school should be discontinued and that schools engage students who are misbehaving in alternative education programmes. The same conclusion can be drawn from Rigby's (2002) meta-analysis of a number of studies of the effectiveness of various approaches to bullying in that it finds what arguably applies to the effectiveness of approaches to serious misbehaviour in general. Rigby showed that employing co-operative learning,

using the curriculum change or a rules and consequences approach, was effective in most cases. The five reviews of problem-solving approaches to bullying were all reported by Rigby to be effective.

The research evidence from the two studies upon which this article is based as well as from studies reported in the literature is unequivocal: if the purpose of a particular intervention is to modify behaviour, then pedagogy not punishment is required.

In each of the cases described in this article, principals had a clear understanding of the need to modify both the curriculum and the pedagogy in order to reduce suspensions and engage students in learning. At Rocky Plain Central School this process comprised: introducing local arts and culture into the curriculum; developing a positive discipline policy that recognized and rewarded good behaviour and learning; involving the community in teaching classes; and involving the community as students in the school. Similarly, at Gold Valley, the principal successfully expanded curriculum offerings to provide industry work experience and VET subjects, in collaboration with the local TAFE college. Finally, at Morrison High School, the curriculum was modified for students who were returning from suspensions. Explicit attention was given to teaching both students and the community about anti-racist attitudes and alternatives to violence in dispute resolution.

For 'effective' principals, pedagogy was not a 'hidden' causal factor in student misbehaviour, rather it was seen in many cases as contributing to problem behaviour and also as a means of addressing and modifying such behaviour (Gladden, 2002).

Engage external support

Like the attitudes of principals to parents and the community, the willingness of the principal to engage and work with agencies outside the school tended to be related to the effectiveness of the school in addressing student behaviour and learning problems. In each of the cases, the principal was seen to engage different external services in support of students and their learning. At Rocky Plains, the principal worked with the Aboriginal Liaison officer to facilitate relations between children, parents, teachers and the community. Involving this person was a key to the effectiveness of the strategies as this person was an important link in communication between the parties. Also, while not formally qualified, members of the community taught in the school and acted as aides, tutors and supervisors. At Gold Valley the principal worked with local employers and the local TAFE college to extend the curriculum offerings of the school and better meet the learning needs of the students.

Engaging external agencies for support in the form of counselling and in the provision of translation services for parents from non-English speaking backgrounds was evident at Morrison High School. Engaging such services also was evident in some city-based schools but was quite rare in regional and rural settings. A number of city-based schools worked with counselling services and with 'suspension services' provided by their school system or by the local government or charities. These services occasionally extended to providing support and counselling for families.

The point of contrast between principals who were seen to be more effective in dealing with student misbehaviour and suspensions for this factor were principals who either saw the engagement of external services as not being their responsibility, saw it as a

responsibility of families, or who argued that they were running a school, not a full education and family service centre. In North America and elsewhere, a lot of attention has been given to the development of schools as part of larger inter-agency collaborative networks (Pounder, 1998). Such developments appear to provide opportunities for schools and communities to better address some of the complex problems that they face. One obstacle to achieving this potential, however, may be the attitudes of principals and teachers about the extent of their responsibilities to the students in the school.

Develop and implement support strategies for teachers

A number of references have been made in this article to the effectiveness of professional development of teachers as a means of addressing poor student learning outcomes and problem behaviour. Looking at the issue of violence in schools, and boys' behaviour in particular, Australian researchers (Meyenn and Parker, 2001) have added their voice to those of a large number of others in the literature to make an argument in favour of the need for more professional development to help teachers deal with problem behaviour.

A central argument of this article is that in many schools, particularly those that ineffectively deal with student disaffection in learning, lack of engagement in school life and student misbehaviour leading to suspension, the students and their background are seen as the cause of students' malaise. This deficit view has the effect of making the school and its practices 'invisible' (Gladden, 2002). In the case study schools, each of the principals engaged in some form of professional development, recognizing that if students were to change, then teachers would have to change their current practices.

At Rocky Plains School, the professional development was particularly crucial as the principal was dealing with a very inexperienced teaching staff. Professional development activities addressed positive reinforcement to modify student behaviour, implementing a Glasser-type staged discipline and welfare policy, understanding and interpreting community language and behaviour standards, and providing support for teachers as they struggled with the inevitable challenges of the first years of being a teacher.

In a similar vein, though with a more experienced staff, the principal at Morrison focused the professional development activities on the anti-racist and anti-violence programmes in the school and also on increasing the understanding of teachers of the students and their community backgrounds. At Gold Valley, the approach was to assist teachers to work with a broader curriculum and to accommodate a wider range of learning styles.

In other schools in the two studies, some of the most impressive initiatives seen in schools were those that adopted a whole-school approach to managing problem behaviour. This comprised actively teaching students about how to deal with matters such as anger, frustration, conflict, bullying and so forth. In these cases, the teaching programmes were developed as part of a whole-school professional development programme.

Conclusion

The two studies of student exclusions from school in N.S.W. conducted during 2002 and 2003 found, among other things, clear evidence that 'school effects' combined with characteristics of students and their backgrounds explained rates of student exclusion

from schools. It is not the student and his or her behaviour alone that results in high rates of school exclusion. In this article, the argument has been made that, of these 'school effects', a vital factor is the leadership of the principal and teachers. Leadership can reduce suspension rates and improve both the behavioural and educational outcomes of students.

With particular reference to three case studies and more general reference to other schools studied in the two projects, several features of effective leadership have been described. These features were:

- working in partnership with parents and the community in addressing student learning problems and misbehaviour;
- providing school work for students who are suspended and developing re-integration plans addressing both the counselling and learning needs of the student upon return to the school;
- modifying the curriculum and teaching methods;
- working with external agencies to assist the school and the student in responding to the learning and behaviour needs of students; and
- developing and implementing support strategies for teachers.

None of these factors in isolation, or even all of them in combination, are likely to be suitable to address every student learning and behaviour problem. What the studies showed, however, was that these features were present in various combinations in schools that were achieving positive outcomes for many of their students

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